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XIII. — *Seneca's Epigrams*

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THE contradictions and mysteries in the life and work of the younger Seneca seem sometimes well-nigh uncanny. We are forced to stop ever and anon to inquire: Was Seneca himself? or his father? Was he a villain? or a martyr? Was he a patriot? or a conspirator? Essentially a rhetorician in training and in the style of his own writings, he has left to a wondering world no work on any rhetorical subject, but, instead, tragic drama not to be acted, epistles not to be sent, dialogues with only one speaker, meditations of a millionaire time-server upon the simple life and rigid virtue, natural science in which ethics rather than science dominates, and a satire on "pumpkinification," which never does pumpkinify! Finally, Saint Jerome, living still in classic times, did not hesitate to canonize Seneca as a saint, on the basis of an interchange of letters with Saint Paul, which the more accurate scholarship of the twentieth century unhesitatingly rejects as spurious; while the genuineness of a series of epigrams attributed to the philosopher ages ago is now questioned, in part at least, because of their scandalous impropriety.

Only three of these epigrams are (in the manuscripts) definitely ascribed to Seneca. Seventy others have been grouped as his, with varying degrees of credence on the part of scholars as to their authenticity. Did Seneca, then, write his own epigrams? or did somebody else write them for him, thus generously contributing one more to the list of his puzzling productions?

Riese thinks it unlikely that he was the author. Teuffel agrees, in the main. Baehrens, however, is inclined to the view that the whole collection is his, on the grounds of the higher criticism, and Schanz admits that for the most part they fit his personality very well, and certainly belong to his epoch. Mr. Butler, in his volume on Post-Augustan Poetry,

expresses the opinion that there is no room for serious doubt of their genuineness, and shows the appropriateness of the subjects to the history and personality of Seneca.

It is indeed as patent to-day as it was to the noted scholars of the sixteenth century who first gave the collection its present form that the subject-matter and the rhetorical style of the epigrams suit well the theory that they were composed by Seneca. Who would be more likely to describe the barrenness of Corsica than the one literary exile to Corsica? to philosophize on the emptiness of honors than he who had seen them wrested from him in a moment? to sigh for the loss of the Pompeys and Catos of the Republic than one who knew from the inside the shallowness and the depravity of such Caesars as Caligula, Claudius, and Nero? Who would moralize on the value of the simple life, or the virtue of suicide, on death as the great leveler, on the doom of the world to a fiery cataclysm, better than the leading Stoic writer of Rome? And, indeed, how can we better explain the reference to the abnegation of the praetorship (5, 4, *alios praetura sequatur*) than by attributing it to him who had lost citizenship just before the time of candidacy for that office? or those to his two brothers and his little nephew Marcus (51) than by identifying them with Gallio, Mela, and Lucan? Who would be so likely to flatter Claudius for his operations in Britain as one in so ticklish a position towards Claudius as was Seneca? And to whose account sooner than to the born and trained rhetorician of this artificial age shall we charge the anaphora, chiasmus, paranomasia, the interrogatory manner, and the countless other rhetorical tricks of these epigrams? As for the erotic poems, it need give us no pause to ascribe them to so inconsistent a character as Seneca, whose life had been thrown within the foul courts of a Messalina and an Agrippina, when a gentleman of so high-toned virtue as that of the younger Pliny goes out of his way to defend his habit of similar composition.

Occasionally the true epigrammatic turn at the finish, the proverbial "sting in the tail," is worthy even of a Martial, certainly not unworthy of a Seneca. So, for example, is No.

53,¹ where, after the enumeration of the gorgeous features of a palatial mansion belonging to a man without character, the crowning disgust of the poet is summed up in the verse :

Turpe est, nil domino turpius esse suo ;

so again in the brief description of the lady whose face was too fair with powder :

Perdidit ut cretam, perdidit et faciem ;

and so too in successive epigrams on the tombs of the great Pompeys :

Victores victa sic patiuntur humo !
Ne sine Pompeio terra sit ulla suo !

Twenty-one years ago the present writer had the honor to present to this Association the results of a study of the diction of the so-called *Apocolocyntosis*, also ascribed to Seneca (cf. *P.A.P.A.* xxvi, xv). If the application of that acid test to the authenticity of that skit was not then entirely conclusive, owing to the striking similarity it revealed between the words of Seneca and those of Petronius, perhaps a similar study in this case should not be expected to be any more convincing. For the diction of poetry always enjoys more latitude, and we cannot fix the date in the life of the writer of these epigrams so definitely as that of the satire on the death of Claudius. Yet the results of such a test, though meagre, prove interesting, especially in confirmation of the theory that all, or nearly all, of the epigrams were written in the early part of Seneca's career and before his more intimate association with Petronius and with the other "rapid" personalities of the young Nero's imperial court.

In the first place, the diction of the epigrams is even more classically orthodox than would be expected. You may read, for instance, the first fifteen, without noting any word indicating that they could not have been composed by Horace or Ovid. Moreover, some of the five categories under which words were classed in the study of the *Apocolocyntosis* either drop out entirely, or have but a nominal representation.

¹ Citations are from the text of Baehrens, *Poetae Latini Minores*, iv, 55-87.

There are no unusual forms of words at all. There are practically no Grecisms, such words as *pyramidas* and *mausoleum* (27, 3 and 5) having been doubtless by this time thoroughly Romanized. *Zelotypa* occurs only in the title of No. 63, a word found also, it may be noted, in Petronius. Two epigrams, it should be added, are addressed to a fair one called *Basilissa*.

There are not more than two newly-coined words in the collection, though a few others appear in a new sense:—

Britannis (35, 6) apparently occurs nowhere else, except in Priscian's *Periegesis*.

triga (38, 5 and 6) does not seem to be known in the classical epoch, unless it is in this passage (compare our colloquial expression, "a whole team"). There is no intrinsic improbability in the evolution of these two words in the age of Seneca.

conrodit (40, 5) in the vulgar sense of 'a passionate kiss' is not found elsewhere.

Fritinnit (51, 5), though used in the literal sense by Varro, is a novelty here with the meaning of 'chirp,' or 'prattle,' as a young child does. These may perhaps better be classed as colloquialisms. Another colloquialism is *deperit* (45, 2), 'she is gone on me,' common enough already in Plautus. Two more are duplicated in other works of Seneca: *dissilit* (45, 1), 'splits' (cf. Sen. *Ep.* 113, *dissilio risu*); and *gestare* (62, 13), 'blab' (cf. *Ep.* 123).

By far the most numerous class of words worthy of note includes those which seem to belong especially to about the period of Seneca, or to have been particularly in favor at that time. About a score of these have been noted, of which at least half appear elsewhere in Seneca, and in some cases are favorite words of his:—

Apex (16, 2): used in the concrete sense of 'the priesthood,' or of an individual 'priest,' and as such unique; but in the abstract conception of 'priesthood' it is cited by Lactantius (xvii, 6) as used by Seneca.

Scopulus (17, 2), 'danger': classical also, and used by Petronius.

Discurrere (25, 39): classical, but not Ciceronian, mostly post-Augustan, and a favorite word of Seneca's.

fellitis (26, 4): apparently only in late Latin.

Dive (33, 3): referring apparently to Augustus by contrast with Claudius.

adaperto (34, 5): classical, non-Ciceronian, but Senecan (cf. *Ep.* 64).

inociduis (36, 6): not found before this period, but occurring in Lucan.

intrepidus (39, 6): belonging especially to the age of Seneca, and occurring elsewhere in his works.

diffusa (39, 7): a favorite expression in this period; found elsewhere in Seneca.

requieta (39, 12): not ante-Augustan; novel here in the middle sense.

supercilio (41, 2), 'sternness' (old-fashioned morality): classical, common in Seneca in this sense.

discurrent (50, 1): cf. 25, 39.

dediscet (50, 8): rare, but classical; cf. Sen. *Troad.* 887.

Phryxæe . . . aquæ (52, 6) = Hellespont: cf. Sen. *Herc. Oet.* 776, Phryxæum mare.

cocco (54, 6) = 'purple cloth': late (e.g. in Prudentius). This may be its first use.

marcida (59, 4): belonging chiefly to this period; cf. Sen. *Med.* 69, a strikingly parallel expression.

actum (61, 3): common in post-Augustan period; if here *in sensu venereo*, apparently unique.

advocationem (70, 2) = 'delay': a common Senecan use, as noted in the study of the *Apocolocyntosis*; cf. Sen. *de Ira*, I, 16; *Apocol.* 14, 37.

The total result of this search in diction, then, includes, so far as it is noteworthy, a couple of apparently post-classical words, about a half-dozen used in a novel, or late, sense, and about a dozen that are more or less characteristic of Seneca. It can hardly be said that this evidence is very strong. Of course it would not help explain the few apparently late words to assume that a part of the epigrams belong to some other authorship in the first century; while to suppose that they were a product of the sixth century at Carthage, or a deliberate forgery of a later time, is to choose the improbable. For an epigrammatist of so late an age, undertaking to fabricate a product apparently Seneca's, would have done either better

or worse: he would have avoided the earmarks of his own day altogether, or we should have seen an entirely different diction and style. In so far as the evidence goes, since there is no word that might not well have been in use in the days of Seneca, and there are many that were especially in vogue then, it is rather in favor of the authenticity of the epigrams.

An examination of the verse-technique of the epigrams affords another check on these results. Here, too, we find, on the whole, very orthodox poetizing. There are, to be sure, out of the 288 elegiac distichs, some 55 (*i.e.* nearly one-quarter of the whole) that do not follow Ovid's rule of completing the sense within themselves. But we must remember that these poems are not elegy proper, in the main; and one needs but to glance over the pages of Rome's most finished epigrammatist, Martial, to find a similar proportion.

Other features of verse-technique show a product in many respects as faultless as the best. The first hundred verses, for example, show but 24 elisions, a proportion, as has been recently demonstrated to this Association, equal to that of the best masters. There is no instance of a spondaic hexameter in the collection. The endings of the hexameters are mostly dissyllabic, with some trisyllabic, one polysyllabic, and about four monosyllabic. There is nothing noticeable in the proportion of dactyls and spondees. The preferred verse-caesura conforms to that in the best elegiac writers of the golden age of Latin verse.

Similar proportions are observed in the pentameters. There is no monosyllabic ending (except a half-dozen elided forms of *esse*, which of course do not produce the monosyllabic effect). The trisyllabic endings number 25; the polysyllabic, 23, the number of each being almost exactly the same as in the polished Tibullus. All the others are evenly dissyllabic, good enough for Ovid himself.

In the matter of middle-and-end rime the number of cases in the pentameters is fifty, exhibiting a slightly smaller per cent than that of Catullus. The proportion of the same phenome-

non in the hexameters, however, is large, with 54 cases; and there are certain other suspicious circumstances. There is remarkable unevenness in this detail. Some little epigrams (like No. 2, one of the most likely to be Seneca's) have this rime in almost every hexameter. In other cases, notably in some of the longest poems, it appears little, or not at all. Moreover, special effort seems to have been made to have this rime appear in the first verse of the epigram, for that is the case in twenty-one instances. Again, the rime several times consists of the repetition of the same word (*e.g.* 68, 3, *et comptos semper vultus unguentaque semper*). In two cases the true leonine, or double, rime occurs:

25, 57, *Semper adulator, semper male fide vagatur;*
 48, 1, *Iunxit magnorum casus fortuna virorum.*

In the midst of these phenomena to run across a poem like No. 72, one of the longest of the collection, consisting of 36 verses, without a single good instance of this rime in any verse, is disconcerting. This is, however, only one of two poems on the evils of civil war. The other one does not exhibit this peculiarity.

Now in this connection it is worth while to notice that the collection consists of groups on the same, or similar, themes. There are two epigrams on Corsica; three on the death of Cato, besides one on his tomb, and another, *De insepultis claris*, mentioning him by name; five epitaphs of the Pompeys, and three *De tumulis Magnorum*; three on 'the simple life'; eight *Laudes Caesaris*; two on the favorite theme, *Memoriam per litteras manere* (a familiar idea in the Roman poets); two on death as the great leveler; two on the evils of civil war; besides those dealing with erotic themes. Of course it is quite conceivable that Seneca repeatedly tried his hand more than once on the same subject. So, for example, in the epigrams in adulation of a Caesar, referring to the conquest of Britain, the verse-technique, while not of uniform merit, has yet essentially the same qualities, and the variations on the same theme may in several, if not all, cases be the work of the same hand:

- 29, 3-4, Oceanusque tuas ultra se respicit aras :
 Qui finis mundo est, non erat imperio.
 30, 3-4, Fabula visa diu medioque recondita ponto
 Libera victori quam cito colla dedit.
 31, 2, Oceanus medium venit in imperium.
 33, 5-6, At nunc Oceanus geminos interluit orbes :
 Pars est imperii, terminus ante fuit.
 34, 5-6, Ultima cesserunt adaperto claustra profundo
 Et iam Romano cingimur Oceano.
 35, 6, Alluitur nostra victa Britannis aqua.
 36, 9-10, Aspice, confundat populos ut pervia Tethys :
 Coniunctum est, quod adhuc orbis et orbis erat.

Only in No. 32, of this group, do we miss entirely the motive found in each of the above-cited passages.

To suggest another probable instance, Nos. 17 and 18, on the advantages of the simple life, are short preachments on the same text, but cumulative in argument in the order in which they stand, with the appeal to personal experience (18, 3), and the final ironical advice :

17

‘Vive et amicitias regum fuge.’ pauca monebas :
 Maximus hic scopulus, non tamen unus erat.
 Vive et amicitias nimio splendore nitentes
 Et quicquid colitur perspicuum, fugito !
 Ingentes dominos et famae nomina clarae
 Inlustrique graves nobilitate domos
 Devita et longe tutus cole ; contrahe vela
 Et te litoribus cymba propinqua vehat.
 In plano semper tua sit fortuna paresque
 Noveris : ex alto magna ruina venit.
 Non bene cum parvis iunguntur grandia rebus :
 Stantia namque premunt, praecipitata ruunt.

18

‘Vive et amicitias omnes fuge’ : verius hoc est,
 Quam ‘regum’ solas ‘ecfuge amicitias.’
 Est mea sors testis : maior me afflixit amicus
 Deseruitque minor. turba cavenda simul.

Nam quicumque pares fuerant, fugere fragorem
Necdum conlapsam deseruere domum.
I nunc et reges tantum fuge! vivere doctus
Uni vive tibi; nam moriere tibi.

Here too we find noteworthy metrical refinements in both poems, like the rimes in the first and last verses of 17, and in the first and second of 18; the identical beginnings of verses 1 and 3 in 17, and endings of 18, 8; the alliteration in both epigrams, especially in 18, 5 and 6; and the use in two successive couplets in 17 (the second and third) of a rime between the middle of the hexameter and the end of the pentameter.

But it may be reasonably doubted that all the duplications mentioned above are certainly Seneca's, or that he neatly pigeon-holed them thus for an admiring posterity. It is more likely that this careful arrangement was made for him after his death, and that in the compiling of such a collection the same thing happened that so often took place with other poets (*e.g.* Plautus and Tibullus), viz. the poems of one or more other authors were gathered in with his own.

An excellent example would be this very 72, of which we were speaking above. It is on the same subject as another which may well be Seneca's own. It has all the rhetorical finesse of his age and his family; indeed Mr. Butler thinks it especially worthy of him. But why would it not be likely that some of the other members of this highly rhetorical family, say Lucan, who died in the same year, should be represented in the collection? Highly probable, too, it would seem that Lucan could have written some of the numerous epigrams on the famous republicans, Pompey and Cato. This may solve the riddle of the sudden variations in metrical style, and leave us free to ascribe the bulk of the collection to Seneca, with an indeterminate element of contemporary origin, and possibly a small accretion of later imitations.